

Information on Marriage Policies for Member Congregations

The Holy Scriptures teach that God, in creating the world, gave marriage to be the life-long union of one man and one woman (Gen 2:24), a gift to be held in honor and kept pure (Heb 13:4; 1Th 4:2-5). As a man and woman freely commit themselves to one another, God himself joins them as one. Marriage is far more than a social contract or a mere interpersonal bond. It is an act of God the Creator. So our Lord Jesus says in Matthew 19 (verses 4-6): “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the *Creator* made them male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh’?”

Marriage cannot be rightly understood apart from another gift: the gift of children. As he creates man and woman, God says, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). As the two “become one flesh,” the highest possible result of this marriage union, when it is God’s will, is the conception and birth of a child. The child is in every sense the “one flesh” of the mother and father and the living sign of their union. The optimal setting for the care of children is the loving marital unity of a man and woman. In such marriage children are nurtured within the distinctive uniqueness and created differences of male and female serving together in the family.

This biblical understanding of the marriage union of man and woman is both purposeful and beautiful. Its purposes include the procreation and nurture of children, the mutual joy and the support and encouragement given to one another by husband and wife, and the restraint of selfishness and sin as each seeks to serve the other’s needs. Such purposes reveal a beauty so great that Ephesians 5:21-33 connects marriage to the holy union of Christ and His “bride,” the church. The apostle Paul writes that even as Christ, the bridegroom, pours forth sacrificial love for his church, the bride, and she trustingly commits her life to him, so also husbands are called to sacrificial love toward their wives and wives to a willing respect for their husbands.

This, in brief, is the Bible’s teaching on marriage—and so it is also the doctrine of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Every congregation and called worker of the LCMS accepts the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice. Congregations and church workers also gladly declare their unswerving conviction that the confessions of the Lutheran church, as found in *The Book of Concord (1580)*, are in full agreement with the Scriptures. LCMS congregations, pastors, and other called servants thus agree to abide by the doctrine of the Synod. To believe that marriage is a sacred union of one man and one woman is not a political opinion or a cultural bias, it is the clear teaching of Holy Scripture, something that the members of the Synod believe, teach, and confess as the very truth of God.

This understanding of marriage is not, however, the view of many people in North America and Western Europe (the West). Recent legislative and judicial actions throughout the West reveal an undeniable fact: marriage is no longer understood to be the lifelong bond of one man and one woman. Countless millions now believe that marriage is a loving, legal commitment between any two individual adults. According to the Pew Research Center, a significant shift of opinion, largely generational in nature, has taken place in the United States. In 2001 only 35% of U.S. adults supported same-sex marriage and 57% opposed it, believing that marriage was only between a man and a woman. In 2013 the numbers are radically different with 50% favoring same-sex marriage and only 43% opposing it. The 2013 United States Supreme Court decisions striking down California's same-sex marriage ban and the federal Defense of Marriage Act reflect this changed view of marriage.

For the LCMS and its congregations these societal and legal trends present great challenges. Pressure on churches to accommodate their teachings and practices to the changing societal view of marriage is increasing. Some church bodies have endorsed same-sex marriage in contradiction to clear biblical teaching. Will cultural attitudes or biblical truth guide our teaching and practice?

We cannot concede to "Caesar" what belongs only to God (Matt 22:21). His Word and His alone must guide the church, not human opinions. "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). To do anything less is to sacrifice the beauty and purposes of marriage as it has been given by God.

LCMS beliefs, practices and policies regarding marriage are firmly established and have long been documented. They are set forth in any number of documents. As examples, please refer to the following materials concerning the Synod's beliefs on marriage:

[*Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective*](#) ([English](#) | [Spanish](#)) (1981) – A report by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

[*Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and their Families*](#) (1999) – A compassionate discussion of the spiritual needs of individuals who experience same-sex attraction and their families, together with suggestions for ministering to them. **Our Lord deals with sin in one way, calling each of us to repentance that we might receive His forgiveness.**

[FAQ on Same-Sex Marriage](#) and [FAQ on the LCMS Response to Homosexuality](#) – In other words, while we reject same-sex marriage, we do not reject individuals who struggle with same-sex attraction, but we seek to love them and call them to repentance and faith in Christ's forgiveness, just as we do for all sinners. We cannot bless same-sex marriage (just as we cannot bless sexual intercourse outside of the marriage of one man and one woman) because we cannot bless what God calls sin. To do so would be to place those who engage in such behavior outside the need for repentance and forgiveness, and thus outside the need for redemption in Christ. Our concerns are always ultimately pastoral, focused on the care of souls in Christ. We seek to be faithful to the Word of God because we care about people.

[*Response to Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*](#) (2012) – A Commission on Theology and Church Relations response opposing the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's decision to affirm same-sex relationships.

[Statement: An Affirmation of Marriage](#) (2013) – Joint statement by the Anglican Church in North America, Lutheran Church—Canada, the LCMS, and the North American Lutheran Church

[Open letter – Marriage and Religious Freedom: Fundamental Goods That Stand or Fall Together](#) – An Open Letter from Religious Leaders in the United States to All Americans.

It is our understanding, based on information from LCMS legal counsel, that currently there is no federal or state law which prohibits ministers from refusing to officiate over same-sex marriages or requires churches to allow their sanctuaries or church facilities to be used for same-sex marriage ceremonies, same-sex civil unions, or same-sex marriage receptions. Indeed, it is our understanding that most, if not all, state laws that recognize same-sex unions and/or same-sex marriages have express exceptions providing that such statutes do not require ministers to participate in such ceremonies or require churches to allow them to take place on their property. However, because laws relating to marriage, same-sex unions and anti-discrimination vary from state to state, as do laws governing certain tax exemptions, each congregation should consult its local legal counsel regarding the applicable state and local laws to confirm this.

Governing documents of member congregations, such as Articles of Incorporation, Constitution, and Bylaws, usually include a statement of adherence to the confessions and beliefs of the Synod as set forth in the Synod Constitution. Such a statement is of particular importance at the present time in light of today’s evolving laws on same-sex marriage and antidiscrimination. For these reasons, it is recommended that congregations affirm their beliefs, practices and policies on marriage in a written statement. Such policies could be included as part of your congregation’s handbook or policy manual or simply be prepared as a separate document.

Further, due to some concern over at least one reported case of a nonprofit organization losing a partial real-estate tax exemption for refusing to rent a seaside pavilion on its property that was open to the public to a same-sex couple for a civil union, it would be prudent to include a provision in your marriage policy limiting the use of the congregation’s property for marriages that are consistent with your beliefs and policies on marriage.

Below is a sample policy that is consistent with the Synod’s beliefs on marriage.

SAMPLE MARRIAGE POLICY

The marriage policy of _____, a member congregation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, is and always has been consistent with the Synod’s beliefs on marriage. We believe that marriage is a sacred union of one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24-25), and that God gave marriage as a picture of the relationship between Christ and His bride the Church (Eph. 5:32). The official position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, as set forth in 1998 Res. 3-21 (“To Affirm the Sanctity of Marriage and to Reject Same-Sex Unions”), is that homosexual unions come under categorical prohibition in the Old and New Testaments (Lev. 18:22, 24; 20:13; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-10) as contrary to the Creator’s design (Rom. 1:26-27). These positions and beliefs can be found on the LCMS website, along with other statements, papers and reports on the subject of

homosexuality and same-sex civil unions and “marriage.” Our pastors will not officiate over any marriages inconsistent with these beliefs, and our church property may not be used for any marriage ceremony, reception or other activity that would be inconsistent with our beliefs and this policy.

The suggested policy statement provided above will provide a measure of legal protection for our congregations to be able to maintain the LCMS’s firm biblical convictions about marriage. We should realize, however, that given the speed of change in opinions about marriage, other legal threats may well arise.

We encourage our congregations to be prudent in decision-making and to share any questions or concerns with District and Synod officials. It would be foolhardy to ignore the grim threats to biblical teaching and practice that we are facing. Yet, it would be far more foolhardy to be overcome by fear because of these challenges, “for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39). We urge all our congregations not to live in fear, but to engage our communities winsomely, lovingly, and faithfully with the glorious truths of God’s Word and, above all, with the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.